



Anti-Burnout: How to Keep Your Energy Going for a Lifetime

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One of the most positive trends in modern society is a belief that a person's entire lifespan should be healthy and valuable. We expect to be engaged and involved into our seventies and eighties, a far cry from the automatic decline that prior generations identified with aging. But the aging process undermines many people, who find that they lose energy as the years go by. I don't mean just diminished physical energy, because mind and body are linked. We have to consider the entire person who is thinking, feeling, hoping, and wishing every day.

Where do you get enough energy to keep going on all fronts? Physics offers a simple but profound answer. In every physical system, the second law of thermodynamics dictates that over time entropy, or disordered energy, increases in a closed system. Energy will dissipate over time, which is why ice cubes melt and stars burn out. But in an open system, a counterforce, evolution, allows energy to be stored and increased. Life is the prime example of negative entropy, as this energy is called, because living things use food, air, and sunlight to extract more energy than they give off.

A human being is an incredibly complex entity, too complex to reduce to simple physics, but it's still true that we must favor evolution over entropy if we want to have energy for a lifetime. In us there is energy loss on the physical, emotional, and spiritual plane if we fail to replenish it.

Physical entropy is linked to aging in most people's minds, but in reality we are worn down by overwork, stress, poor sleep, the inability to take downtime, and a frenetic pace that the body can adapt to for only so long.

Emotional entropy can't be separated from the physical, since factors like inadequate sleep, overwork, and stress have emotional consequences--we lose enthusiasm and interest in what we're doing. Emotional entropy is also caused by psychological issues like depression, anxiety, strained relationships, abusive behavior, and low self-esteem.

Spiritual entropy comes about when we lose our sense of purpose and meaning. This is a prevalent issue for millions of people when they retire or see their children leave home. But there's also spiritual depletion through grief, abuse, lack of purposeful work, and any occasion of personal defeat.

As you can see, **entropy, both literally and metaphorically, is a powerful force that can invade any part of our lives, and if we had to counter it one piece at a time, we could only hope for partial success.** In a society where mass media equates happiness with youth, beauty, a toned body, sex, and riches, the reality of life is being hidden from sight, because none of these things, desirable as they are, will prevent the gradual inroads made by entropy as it inexorably works its way year after year.

Which isn't to say that the situation is grim. In modern times there have been major victories against entropy, most of them physical. We can cure diseases that have sapped the life out of people for centuries. We know how prevention works. We can have clean air and water, along with natural, whole foods, by exerting some effort. Recovery from debilitating stroke and heart attack is better than ever. These are all positive signs of evolution or progress.

But the subtle aspects of entropy, the psychological and spiritual setbacks that drain us, need to be countered, too, and that requires expanded awareness. The evolution of the inner person holds the key to energizing the entire system, including the body. Research into meditation, for example, indicates that its benefits are holistic. Yet many people have negative associations with the whole project of consciousness raising, self-awareness, and the alien Eastern ethos surrounding yoga and meditation.

The rap against these things is that with meditation one becomes calm and passive at the expense of achievement. Yoga has been tagged as belonging to non-achievers rather than to everyone. Self-awareness is suspicious because it supposedly forces you to think about all the conflicts and problems hidden beneath the surface of one's inner existence. Better not to stir sleeping dogs and just get on with life.

All of these attitudes are mistaken, and more importantly, they are entropic, that is, depleting. If you ignore the emotional and spiritual issues that drain away enthusiasm, self-confidence, curiosity, inspiration, and self-worth, you have pushed away the possibility of evolving and growing. When that possibility lies fallow, entropy finds a way to win, no matter how smart, good-looking, physically fit, and rich you are. The reason we are here as living creatures is entirely due to the force of evolution. For billions of years evolution operated as an external, physical agent of growth. Now the fame has shifted, and as conscious beings we must go inward to activate our evolution. The evolution of consciousness sounds pretentious, overly ambitious, and selfish to those who haven't experienced it. But if you want to have energy that lasts a lifetime, here is the key.

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